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SUBJECT: AMB VERVEER FINDS PARTNERS IN KOREA TO ADVANCE
WOMEN'S RIGHTS; HEARS PLANS TO INCLUDE WOMEN'S ISSUES ON
THE G-20 AGENDA

REF: SEOUL 1419 (FOREIGN WIVES)

Classified By: AMBASSADOR KSTEPHENS. REASONS 1.4 (B/D)

Summary

11. (C) Summary: During her December 8-9 visit to Seoul, Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues Melanne Verveer met with government officials and civil society representatives to discuss Korea's progress on women's rights and plans for closing the gender equality gap. National Assembly Members from the Gender Equality Committee requested USG support for including women's issues on the agenda of the 2010 Seoul G-20 Summit. Representatives of NGOs providing assistance to North Korean refugees reported that more than 80 percent of North Korean refugees living in the ROK are women and that 80 percent of those women have had experiences with trafficking and/or sexual exploitation during their journey to the ROK. Members of the Northeast Asia Women's Peace Conference shared their vision of the role for women in finding a peaceful solution to the North Korean nuclear problem. Ambassador Verveer found broad support for the idea that increasing respect for women's rights and closing the gender equality gap was the key to Korea's efforts to continue economic growth, solving its looming demographic problems, and integrating the increasing number of foreign brides into Korean society. End Summary.

Comment

12. (SBU) Ambassador Verveer's trip highlighted the strong and growing recognition in the ROK that the issue of women's rights is increasingly critical to the ROK's future competitiveness and international standing. Given the strong interest and breadth of interlocutors from the public, private and NGO communities displayed during Ambassador Verveer's visit, we welcome ways to work with Ambassador Verveer's office and the Department to increase opportunities to engage the ROKG in the international effort to promote women's issues locally and abroad. We encourage more dialogue and programming to address the human rights issues affecting North Korean women. The National Assembly's interest in including women's issues on the G-20 agenda could provide an opportunity to increase this type of cooperation.

Line-Up: Ambassador Verveer Talks With Top ROKG
and NGO Leaders

¶3. (C) During a December 8-9 visit to Seoul, Ambassador at Large for Women's Issues Melanne Verveer met with Minister for Health, Welfare, and Family Affairs (MHWF) Jeon Jae-hee, Minister for Gender Equality (MGE) Paik Hee-young, and MOFAT Second Vice Foreign Minister Chun Young-woo. Ambassador Verveer also met National Assembly Gender Equality Committee (GEC) Chairwoman Representative Shin Nak-yun and 10 National Assembly Members from the Gender and Equality Committee. Finally, from the civil society community, Ambassador Verveer met Moon Kyung-ran, Executive Director of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), 14 businesspeople from AMCHAM'S Board of Governors and Professional Women's Committee, 9 leaders from the North Korea refugee community, 19 women NGO leaders from the Northeast Asia Women's Peace Conference (NAWPC), and Sungshin Women's University officials and students to discuss issues that affect women and girls and the ROKG's plans for closing the gender equity gap in Korea.

Legislators Advocate Advancing Global Women's
Economic Agenda

¶4. (C) At the National Assembly, Gender Equality

Committee Chairwoman Shin Nak-yun told Ambassador Verveer that her highest priority was to include women's economic issues on the agenda of the 2010 Seoul G-20 Summit in Seoul. "You can not address economic issues without addressing women's issues," Shin said. Shin asked for USG support and noted she was also lobbying the Lee Myung-bak administration for support on this matter.

¶5. (C) Representatives of AMCHAM's Board of Governors and Professional Women's Committee discussed the potential gains of fully including women in Korea's economy. Though women have made progress in Korea in recent years, the AMCHAM representatives said that women needed mentors and more development opportunities like those provided by Pathways to Prosperity, the initiative launched in 2008 in the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, to ensure that the benefits of free trade and open investment were more broadly shared throughout society.

NGO Leaders on the Human Rights Situation for
North Korean Women

¶6. (C) Lee Jung-hye, Chief of Mission for the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in the ROK, explained to Ambassador Verveer that more than 80 percent of North Korean refugees living in the ROK are women and that 80 percent of those women have had experiences with trafficking and/or prostitution during their journey to the ROK. Prominent female NGO leaders, National Assembly Members, and former defectors told of North Korean refugees who suffered exploitation, prostitution, and violence during their efforts to get to the ROK. According to Kang Su-jin, former refugee and President of the Coalition for North Korean Women's Rights, North Korean women are vulnerable to exploitation by brokers and traffickers and many become fugitive refugees, constantly on the run from local officials to avoid repatriation. Kang also reported that a large percentage of the women that finally made it to the ROK suffer psychological trauma,

malnutrition, and lack the basic socioeconomic skills to integrate into ROK society successfully.

¶7. (U) NGO leaders from the North Korean defector community stressed to the Ambassador that the ROKG also sponsors extensive research and data collection about the DPRK from the defector community to better inform civil society efforts. Many of the defectors, however, were critical of the lack of credible research available on the defector community, thus limiting their ability to promote awareness on human rights issues affecting North Korean women. Internal politics and ideological differences have also inhibited program coordination between defector groups.

¶8. (U) Members of the Northeast Asia Women's Peace Conference thanked Ambassador Verveer for receiving them earlier this year in Washington, and hosted a lunch roundtable with a range of mostly progressive-oriented NGOs and women's groups. Former Prime Minister Han Myeong-sook at the last moment did not attend, due to the ongoing prosecutors investigation into illegally receiving funds, which Han denies. At the roundtable, members shared their vision with Ambassador Verveer for a women's Six-Party Conference, to include women from the countries participating in the Six-Party Talks. Representatives of the group complained that the Lee Myung-bak administration has hampered their efforts by cutting government funds to pro-engagement NGOs and not supporting engagement opportunities with North Korea.

South of the DMZ: Snapshot of Gender-related Trends in the ROK

¶9. (SBU) Gender Equality Committee Chairwoman Shin informed the Ambassador that Korea ranks 25th out of

157 countries on the UN Gender-related Development Index, due in large measure to women's relatively high education, life expectancy, and income levels. She stated that the ROK ranked 68 out of 108 countries on the UN Gender Empowerment Measure, however, falling from 53rd in 2003, due to women's relatively low political and economic status. Chairwoman Shin also said Korean women have suffered disproportionately because of the global economic crisis, as 90 percent of Korea's recently unemployed were women and that the salary gap between men and women has increased to 66.4 percent.

Ministers Discuss Challenges of Balancing Work-Life Issues

¶10. (U) In her meeting with the Ambassador, Minister for Gender Equality Paik said that helping women balance work-life issues was a priority. She related that the ROKG has begun phasing in new flex-time regulations designed to encourage women with family responsibilities to remain in the work force. Minister Paik told Ambassador Verveer that she is also looking for ways to address discrimination against expectant mothers. By law, Korean companies must allow for a maximum one year of maternity leave if the employee requests ; and as a result, many companies choose not to hire women. Women returning to work after taking maternity leave, according to Paik, are often assigned to low-level, low-paying jobs. Chairwoman Shin asserted that the National Assembly's Gender Equality Committee has introduced legislation to increase the number of public childcare facilities

for working mothers and to provide incentives for businesses that provide child care services.

Leaders Highlight Demographic Trends and Women's Rights

¶11. (U) All of the leaders agreed that the challenges women in Korea face balancing family and career responsibilities are a contributing factor to South Korea's dire demographic problem. In 2008, Korea's fertility rate of 1.19 live births per woman was the lowest in the OECD. During Ambassador Verveer's meeting with MHWF Minister Jeon Jae-hee, Jeon said the low birthrate reflected women's strong reluctance to have children. Her office confirmed that, in 2005 (the most recent statistics available), doctors performed about 330,000 abortions in Korea, while annual live births average only 450,000. GEC officials confirmed that women are choosing abortion, not because they do not want children, but because of the difficulties of childrearing while working. At a separate meeting, the women from the NAWPC stressed, if, as the government recently announced, the ROKG wants to reduce the number of abortions, which are illegal except in exceptional circumstances, to increase the birthrate, the government has a responsibility to provide economic assistance and reduce the stigma associated with single motherhood.

Officials Discuss Issues in Adapting to a Multi-Cultural Society

¶12. (C) During Ambassador Verveer's discussions with Minister Jeon, Jeon also explained that, for many of the same reasons Korean women are having fewer children, fewer Korean women are marrying or are marrying at a later age. The result is a shortage of Korean brides. Minister Jeon said the solution, increasingly, is to fill the gap with foreign brides, most of whom come from Southeast Asia (reftel). Officials informed the Ambassador that, in 2007, eleven percent of all marriages in Korea were international marriages, and in rural areas 41 percent of marriages were international marriages (2006).

¶13. (U) According to Chairwoman Shin, the government

is implementing initiatives to address the exploitation of foreign wives including the 2007 Act on Management of Marriage Brokerage Business, passed by the National Assembly, which required matchmaking agencies to register with regional government offices and abide by both Korean and host country laws. She stated that the government is also conducting orientation classes for prospective brides in their home countries to prepare for successful entry into Korean society, creating governmental support groups to assist foreign brides in Korea, and making it easier for foreign brides to attain Korean citizenship in the case of failed marriages.

¶14. Ambassador Verveer cleared this message.
STEPHENS